

Interview with Gilbert H. Sheinbaum

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

GILBERT H. SHEINBAUM

Interviewed by: Thomas J. Dunnigan

Initial interview date: September 6, 1995

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: The date is September 6, 1995. Today I will be talking with Gilbert Sheinbaum, a retired Foreign Service Officer, on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Gil, in starting, tell me something of your background. I notice you served in the army for two years, and I wonder how you got interested in the Foreign Service as a career. Had you thought of this in earlier life, or did it come to you — when in the university or in the army?

SHEINBAUM: Tom, it was sort of by accident, surprisingly. I was originally a pre-med student in college and then, halfway through college, I switched to history and political science and hoped to go into journalism as I spent four years on the NYU Heights Daily News, serving the entire last year as Editor-in-Chief. I was also manager of the varsity baseball team, although I cannot recall how I did it all.

After the army, while I was working in New York as production manager for an outerwear manufacturing firm, I also spent a year attending courses on international relations at the New School for Social Research. Well, I hadn't really given any thought to the Foreign Service until my brother, Stan, showed up in New York in the summer of '55, just back from a Fulbright in Paris. He'd gone through undergraduate school as well

Library of Congress

as graduate at Stanford (he had been a teaching assistant on the economics faculty, an exceptionally distinguished faculty), and he was heading to Michigan State University to teach economics and head up the brand new Vietnam program there, the first AID-funded college contract for a specific country.

Well, we went off to nearby New Jersey on a Sunday in August to see one of his old friends from Stanford, Jim Green, who had just resigned from the Foreign Service after serving a tour in Mexico City. Jim was ecstatic about the Foreign Service but he resigned for three reasons. Number one: he felt that he couldn't hack it in those days with four children in the Foreign Service. Number two: he had been assigned from Mexico City to Bangkok to be staff assistant to Ambassador John Peurifoy, then Peurifoy was killed driving his sportscar across one of those one-way bridges outside Bangkok. Number three: at the same time he had a great offer from the Hanover Bank, resulting from contacts as economic officer in Mexico City. (Jim wound up as Senior Vice President of Manufacturers Hanover.)

Jim couldn't have spoken more highly of the Foreign Service. Well, that got my interest up, so as we drove home from New Jersey to New York, I asked Stan, "How come you never mentioned the Foreign Service to me?" and he said, "Well, I hadn't thought about it." Later on, I found out that Stan himself had thought about the Foreign Service some years earlier but was very disappointed to learn that he was, at 31, over the age limit, which may have been why he had never mentioned it to me.

Well, I applied for the exam and took it in June '56. I thought I had failed and decided to leave my job in New York anyway and move to California to find a job there, only to find out in late September, two weeks before I was planning to leave, that I had passed. So I called the Department immediately and was told, "If you want to take the one-hour oral, just come down next week to Washington," which I did. I flew down for a day on the new Eastern Airlines shuttle (then costing \$12 each way), took the oral and was notified on the spot that I had passed. Having already given notice at my job in New York, I decided

Library of Congress

to proceed with the move to Palo Alto in early October as planned because Stan was at Stanford for that quarter and I could audit some courses in international economics, all of which were exceptional. I also did some research for the Economics Department chairman, Lorrie Tarshis, whose basic text on economics was the academic world's bible before Paul Samuelson published his own famous text.

I was called in early December to report to the Department on January 3, 1957. Mind you, from June 25th, when I took the exam, to January 3rd, when I arrived on duty, was just a little over five months, which I was told was a record at the time.

Q: That is faster than it happens in most cases, I know.

SHEINBAUM: That's right — especially now. But what happened was, you see, our father was born in Brest-Litovsk, what was then Russia and is now Belarus. He had come over in 1899, at the age (we think) of 16. I found out subsequently that a security check had been done on Stan because another agency was thinking about hiring him only the year before and, as a result, his clearance (I'm not sure he knew of it) permitted me to just breeze through the security check which otherwise - because of our father - would have taken a year, I was told .

Q: Well, then you went to the Foreign Service training school , I gather, for several months?

SHEINBAUM: That's right. For three months in the A-100 course at FSI, which was then on C Street where New State now exists. Much to my surprise, the class elected me Class President.

Q: And your first assignment was to Laos which in those days, as I remember, was very much in the headlines.

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: Well, not when I went there but after about a year or so. When I returned to the States in mid-1959 I was asked to talk to a lot of young kids in different groups about Laos, which they were just finding on the map since it was getting more and more coverage owing to new communist participation in the government coalition while the U.S. was supporting anti-communist elements.

Q: Right. Now you had two chiefs out there, I gather, Jeff Parsons and Horace Smith, is that right?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct.

Q: Both career officers?

SHEINBAUM: That's right.

Q: Well, tell me a little about them. How were they as chiefs and did they pay attention to the most junior officer there?

SHEINBAUM: Well, not only was I the most junior officer, I held the position of disbursing officer, so I didn't have any influence on policy. I had not been happy about going into that job. I was very happy about going to Laos, but disbursing was the type of thing I was trying to get away from in New York. Nonetheless, it turned out to be very interesting because through finance I learned a lot about the U.S. Government as I was disbursing for six agencies there including USIA, AID, a pseudo-military, the Agency, and one other, I can't remember which, maybe it was VOA. But I did have enough interface with both Jeff Parsons and Horace Smith and got to know them rather well. Jeff Parsons I had a great deal of respect for; he died, of course, a few years ago, and he and I had maintained a correspondence during his last ten or fifteen years. He was the first ambassador I ever knew on the job, and he was a pro. He, unfortunately, did not get along with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, perhaps because of policy from Washington, which is what, I believe, led to his early departure and reassignment as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East

Library of Congress

Asia Bureau. It was surprising because both of those men were rather thoughtful men, had good education and were intellectually strong, and you would have thought would have gotten along well. I don't know the background; I don't remember having read about why they split. Horace Smith was a different type of person. Horace was a jolly, not very substantive person, a good guy. He was always supportive of his troops (as was Jeff Parsons), but, of course, that was the old Foreign Service.

The Agency (CIA, to be more specific) had a great deal of control over operations in Laos during that time as events were evolving in Indochina. Perhaps some of that was due to Ambassador Smith's own concept of how to deal with Laos, but I think most of it was due to the influence of CIA Director Allen Dulles, the military, and so on. They were aided and abetted by John Foster Dulles who was still Secretary of State but in rapidly declining health (I believe he died in 1959). I saw Horace again during my following posting in Paris: he loved to ride around in my Austin Healey and eat in my favorite bistros. He was a very likable person, but I think events took control of his time in Laos.

Q: Was your entire tour in Laos spent as disbursing officer?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct.

Q: So you got no rotation and no training in other phases of the Foreign Service.

SHEINBAUM: That's correct, except that there were three very fine officers who were very helpful to me in teaching me about substantive work. One was the chief of the political section, Chris Chapman. The second was John Gunther Dean who was the junior political officer, and he actually led me through a lot of what he was doing there which gave me great insight into policy and developments. There was also Elden Erickson, our economic officer, who had been repatriated in (I think) 1951 after being interned in Mukden with Angus Ward.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, all those were good officers who had fine careers ahead of them. Who was the DCM at that time?

SHEINBAUM: Lee Bacon was my first DCM. Now, I didn't have that much contact with him. He was succeeded by John Holt. I didn't have that much to do with him either, except at the time that my superior, the B&F officer, died suddenly from too much alcohol and pills.

Q: Was our advice influential with the Lao at that time?

SHEINBAUM: I think so, although Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma tried to resist our advice to a great extent, which led to conflict within his own government. His successor, Phoui Sananikone, was much more amenable to dealing with us. But of course, things got a bit out of control as time went on.

Q: Yes, and we were unhappy with the coalition government that was set up there later which included the Pathet Lao and so forth.

SHEINBAUM: That's right. That took place just before I left. Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong (a half-brother to Souvanna Phouma) came in out of the cold, was seen around town and even went to receptions. Much to my surprise, I was at a reception and this man approached me from my side and started speaking in good French: it was Souphanouvong, "the ogre" as we thought of him in those days, but he wasn't an ogre like Pol Pot, quite a distinct difference.

Q: Was it the general belief at the embassy at that time that Laos was slipping into communism?

SHEINBAUM: There was great fear of the domino theory.

Q: Yes. Was our aid well used? We were giving quite a bit of aid, I think.

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: We were. We had a pretty good aid program there. Some of it was emergency aid for people who were suffering in one way or another. I think some of our projects were pretty good, such as infrastructure and agricultural development. We had some really good people in the aid program, but we also had too many losers: has-beens and others who were clearly not suited for working in that type of environment but enjoyed the perks of overseas living, government paychecks, and (in a couple of cases) eager to avoid previous charges of malfeasance on the job. One of the latter actually continued his malfeasance while working for AID.

Q: Well, did we have any proof of interference by the North Vietnamese in Laos at that time?

SHEINBAUM: Some. They had, of course, control over the Lao communists who had control of the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua which border on Vietnam. Therefore, the North Vietnamese ran all over those places at the time.

Q: Were you able to travel around the country at all or were you pretty well stuck in Vientiane?

SHEINBAUM: I was able to travel a lot because I did some volunteer things to help out the USIS and AID programs. We were dropping supplies on occasion, foodstuffs and aluminum roofing, to needy villagers. I went to almost all parts of the country — never got to the Plaine des Jarres nor Phong Saly nor Sam Neua, but I did get up to Muong Sing which is five miles from the Chinese border. I flew up with the army attach# and spent the long weekend with Dr. Tom Dooley and his gang, whom I knew from Vientiane. Tom and I had become pretty good friends, and when I returned to New York on home leave in August-September 1959 he was already in the hospital with cancer of the chest. I was with him almost every day at the hospital, opening mail and doing other chores for him, including accompanying his mother on occasion. Visiting with Tom in Muong Sing gave me a good insight on Laos, mingling among folks living in remote areas, not just in the

Library of Congress

rural areas around Vientiane, and that was rather revealing for a new officer in the Foreign Service. And I did odd jobs for USIA. I used to take one of their mobile units out to the countryside and show films on my own time. I was also a disk jockey for six months on a new radio station VOA set up for the Lao Government.

Q: A disk jockey!

SHEINBAUM: The VOA had brought in a new radio station for the Lao and had an unwritten agreement that we would have one hour daily on the station from one to two every afternoon, on which we would play popular music. One of the VOA guys was the disk jockey but when he left he invited me to take over. So I was a disk jockey for six months in addition to my regular duties. Fortunately, that was during the lunch hour — we had an hour and a half for lunch so I was doing an hour of disk jockeying and eating my lunch at the same time, and it did not interfere with my regular work.

Q: You ate your lunch to music, in other words.

SHEINBAUM: That's right.

Q: Well, when you left, Gil, did you have any hope for Laos? That it could remain independent or neutral or were you pessimistic about its chances?

SHEINBAUM: I was ambivalent, I would say. I literally cried on the plane when I left. I went down to Bangkok on a CAT flight (CAT was the predecessor of Air America), and I was the only passenger on the flight. The pilot was Bruce Blevens, and I was sitting in the back and just thinking about the magnificent two years there, thinking about what the hell was going to become of Laos. So I was hopeful but not unrealistic. I guess I'd put it that way.

Q: Have you ever had a chance to go back to Laos?

SHEINBAUM: I took my wife back there back in 1988. I had to go back on business when I was Director of the Colombo Plan, and Laos is a member of the Colombo Plan. We spent

Library of Congress

three days in Vientiane and three days in Luang Prabang, the old royal capital, and had a very nice trip.

Q: You were next assigned to Paris. That was a reward for your service in Laos or normal?

SHEINBAUM: Well, of course, when I was leaving for Laos in 1957, it seemed like everyone in Personnel, probably not including Pat Byrne (the desk officer, later Ambassador to Mali and Burma), felt sorry that I was being assigned to Laos. I wasn't at all unhappy about being assigned to Laos, as I mentioned before. I was simply unhappy about going into disbursing, but in the end that turned out to be a good thing as a start in the Foreign Service. When I left for Laos, they said, "Oh, don't worry, we'll take care of you the next time." But who would believe that? So when my orders came in for Paris, it took the code room twenty-four hours to convince me that they were legitimate orders because I had seen them play around in the code room dummifying up orders for other people, and I could not believe that I was really going to Paris.

Q: But you had home leave in between, I think.

SHEINBAUM: Home leave, yes.

Q: Good. Now in Paris, you arrived in 1959, you had two ambassadors, Amory Houghton and Jim Gavin, I gather. And you were assigned there as economic officer this time.

SHEINBAUM: I was economic officer; the assistant civil air attach#, and the transportation and telecommunications officer. After I'd been there only a couple of months on the job, my boss, Bert Colclaser, the civil air attach# and a very experienced woman in civil aviation, an aviation lawyer, went on home leave for three months. Well, that made it more interesting for me because of unexpected things I had to do. Like, suddenly, negotiation of an amendment to the Civil Aviation Agreement between France and the United States. That really was demanding in terms of both what I knew about civil aviation and with my French, but it all worked out well. I also did have some things to do with surface

Library of Congress

transportation. I think the most interesting aspect of my stay there, aside from the social life, was having done a rather lengthy report on the embryonic development of the French SST, supersonic transport, about which the United States knew very little. Even though I was not technically qualified, I was able to use various sources I'd developed for the report, and they put all the details in laymen's terms for me. That report brought to Paris Najeeb Halaby, then head of the FAA. And he came out because nobody knew that the French had progressed so far, as I reported, and the Kennedy Administration was pondering whether or not we should develop an SST, a very costly venture if we went ahead. In the end we didn't. I think that was a wise move because, as we now see, the British-French Concorde, while a remarkable achievement, didn't really do much for the industry's long-term interests. And it never repaid the massive investment. Perhaps, on the technical side, it may have been useful for research, and we probably benefited from that as well. It was a very satisfying experience for me.

Q: And economically, it hasn't paid off.

SHEINBAUM: No, that's what I mean.

Q: Now, when you arrived, in '59, had France recovered from the upheavals of 1958, the student revolt and all the other things that had gone on?

SHEINBAUM: Well, yes, it was fairly calm there - at first. De Gaulle was in full control at that time. It was rather remarkable. I had arrived only a year or so after those events and I was surprised in a way to find France — only fourteen years after the end of the war — in such good shape. And spiritually, the arrival of De Gaulle on the scene had brought great relief that they had a strong man running the government. Not everybody agreed with him, but even most who didn't were grateful for the fact that they did have stable government. Then you had the Algerian business the following year, and that was a remarkable development.

Library of Congress

Q: I want to refer to that a little later. Who was the economic minister at the embassy at that time?

SHEINBAUM: Jack Reinstein.

Q: Jack Reinstein, oh yes. With a great German background, too — and French. And De Gaulle had put in an austerity program , as I recall. Was that successful?

SHEINBAUM: To a certain extent, but I don't think I'm equipped really to comment on it because, in retrospect, I haven't studied it in detail. All I know is that the French economy seemed to be very stable during all of the '60s long after I was there.

Q: Well, I would say, from many visits to Paris, is that austerity does not seem to be in the French character very often .

SHEINBAUM: Well, De Gaulle was not in the French character either for that matter. But he lasted for a long period of time, eleven years, not including his first appearance on the scene as the war was ending, but he did provide the stability that was needed and he had some great ideas to make the French, the Fifth Republic, a very stable . . .

Q: I would imagine he will go down as one of the great Frenchmen of the century.

SHEINBAUM: Of course. And his relationship with Adenauer — not always smooth — was often tenuous but nonetheless they made remarkable achievements for Europe.

Q: Now you were there in Paris when the French had their first successful nuclear test? What did that do to morale? Did it improve it? Were people unhappy with it?

SHEINBAUM: I don't remember, Tom. I don't have any recollection of reactions.

Q: How about the Common Market, which was then beginning to roll? Were the beneficial effects appreciated by the French?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: I think so. I think the French, perhaps more than the other participants in the Common Market, the other five countries at that time, were hesitant about the Common Market. I'm not sure of De Gaulle's substantive views on that himself, but the Common Market agreement had already been signed and he seemed to want to move ahead, feeling that was the way to go, probably as a major element of a strong Franco-German relationship that would obviate the possibility of friction that could lead to hostilities. So it was NATO and the Common Market together.

Q: While you were there, Gil, were American businesses welcome? Could they be established easily and were the French willing to cooperate with them?

SHEINBAUM: The French were particularly interested in our technology and business management abilities. Those were very strong factors. Now I was only involved really in the field of civil aviation and transportation and communications and there was a great deal of interest in American technology and having American companies coming over. Naturally, the French were very protective of their companies. I remember, there was a big story about Machines Bull, the French company that, I think, was partially owned by the Government — it may have been all state-owned for all I know — but nonetheless, while they were very protective of their own market, they were also very interested in getting a hold of our technology and being able to compete in the export markets. There was technology that the Americans could provide that they could not. So I could not make an overall judgment in every sector of the economy, but it seemed to me that American businesses were flourishing there even though American goods were - at that time - expensive for Europeans as the dollar was very strong. There were some restrictions, but nonetheless there was great opportunity for American business.

Q: That has been somewhat reversed.

SHEINBAUM: I would say yes.

Library of Congress

Q: During the latter part of your tour, the French were deeply involved in the troubles in Algeria with the revolt of the French generals and so forth. What was the reaction of your French contacts to that? Were they happy to see the French out of Algeria? Did they want to stay?

SHEINBAUM: When I arrived in Paris, I didn't know any French people aside from those I knew in Indochina — what some still call Indochina: Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia — and had come to live in Paris for the first time in years. So a small group of six or eight French families gave me immediate access to the French social way of life. Of course, they themselves felt like outsiders because most of them had spent so many years in Indochina. But their views were rather ambivalent about Algeria. I think they saw the handwriting on the wall: Algeria, somehow or other, was going to go the way of Vietnam, but not necessarily in an identical fashion.

Q: France couldn't hold on to it.

SHEINBAUM: That's right. And also they resented the attitude of the French military, or rather those in the French military who were defying De Gaulle and were de-stabilizing the country. That they resented. By that time, after six months or more in Paris, I did have other French friends who resented this intrusion by the military into the private lives of the French in France. I remember I didn't think I would ever see Paris the way I saw it for several days when the streets were cleared, when there was nobody on the streets, when buses were lined up to block the bridges, tanks in the streets, the military . . . Despite curfews, I had to make a couple of runs at night down to the embassy - past rows of tanks and other military vehicles - because of commercial aircraft that were scheduled to come in, and we had to get messages to them to divert since the runways were blocked. It was a very spooky feeling, much in the way that Washington was spooky in April 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Q: I remember that.

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: I came back suddenly to Washington in April 1968 from Vietnam with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. I was his Staff Assistant. We were here for three days and there was nobody on the streets the first two days. Who would have ever thought there would be a situation like that here in Washington or anywhere in the States. It was a spooky feeling. In France from then on the military, not only in Algeria but throughout France, had a much lower influence on government policy.

Q: Your tour in Paris came to an end in '62?

SHEINBAUM: January of '62.

Q: And you were transferred back to the Department for an assignment back here. You were here from '62 to '64. What did you do in those years, Gil?

SHEINBAUM: I was in the European Bureau, in the Office of Atlantic Political-Economic Cooperation which dealt primarily with the Common Market, the OECD, and some other European economic organizations. The European Coal and Steel Community was still separate from the Common Market, and I was involved on the energy side. I also dealt with such esoteric things as the Central Rhine Commission, the Council of Europe and the ECE — the UN Economic Commission for Europe

Q: It sounds like an ideal assignment for someone with your background in France and economic affairs to gradually move into political matters too.

SHEINBAUM: Yes. It really gave me great substantive insight into policy-making.

Q: Who was the head of the office at that time?

SHEINBAUM: First it was Stan Cleveland who had just taken over. And then it was Deane Hinton.

Library of Congress

Q: And I take it you found that work congenial and . . .

SHEINBAUM: Yes, very.

Q: Did you get to travel to Europe?

SHEINBAUM: I had one trip to Europe for the ECE meeting of 1963 — their annual meeting.

Q: I know I was in Bonn at that time and there was considerable excitement over the De Gaulle-Adenauer rapprochement and the Franco-German agreements, and I'm sure they were deeply involved in the work you were doing and following. Any highlights of that time that you'd like to mention?

SHEINBAUM: I would. One had nothing to do with the Foreign Service and, in retrospect after all these years, I don't know how I ever did it. I moonlighted as stage manager for the American Light Opera Company, for which I was not paid.

Q: Now wait a minute. You go from being a disk jockey to a stage manager. How does this happen?

SHEINBAUM: It was just coincidental. I had some experience in stage work. In fact, I had stage managed two shows in Paris for the military. Not that I had any real experience, but when I came to Washington I saw an ad in the newspaper of auditions for the American Light Opera Company which was auditioning for Jerome Kern's "Showboat." So I went and found myself interested, and I said, "I've had some work, do you need an assistant stage manager?" "Yeah, we do." They took me on and from the second show on I was the principal stage manager. We put on four or five shows a year. They ran for three weeks, six performances a week. We had a rehearsal period six weeks prior to the opening night and, of course, some preparation before that. And how I did that and kept the job in the

Library of Congress

State Department, I don't know. But maybe my efficiency reports reflected the fact that I had other things on my mind.

Q: Burning the candle at both ends, I would say.

SHEINBAUM: The other thing was that shortly after I arrived in Washington, I was asked to join the board of the Junior Foreign Service Officers Club. I became president of the club for the year 1963-64. JFSOC — as it was known — in those days put on the annual July Fourth Reception at the State Department, which was quite an undertaking.

Q: On the Eighth Floor, I've been to some of those and I know they're very nice.

SHEINBAUM: Well, I had one coup. For the 1963 reception we learned that we weren't going to get the liquor supply free that we had received the first two years. I wasn't president of the group yet, but I had a friend in Senator Javits' office who I asked if the Senator could get New York State wines. They didn't come up with New York State wines, they came up with California champagne! We served nothing but champagne and soft drinks, the champagne only in two champagne fountains where everyone helped themselves. It was a great evening!

Q: This is too rich for junior Foreign Service Officers, Gil.

SHEINBAUM: That's right, too rich.

Q: I know I had a good deal to do with the Junior Foreign Service Officer Group when I was heading the junior officer program at State in subsequent years so I know them well. Now in 1964, your tour in the Department came to an end and you were assigned to Saigon.

SHEINBAUM: Well, I was actually first assigned to Princeton.

Q: Princeton, New Jersey?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: I wanted a year's economic training to make up for my academic shortfall. The program - and Princeton in particular - was hard to come by, as you can well imagine. On July 1st, I was only a few weeks away from taking some leave and going to Princeton. I remember the date well because it was Foreign Service Day in those days and as JFSOC President I had role at the reception. At 6 p.m.precisely, I had come back from the reception to work in my office, and Deane Hinton walks in and closes the door behind him, which was very unusual. I don't remember that door ever having been closed before. And he sits down and he says, "Gil, are you of good heart?" "Yes." "Did you have a drink downstairs?" Hmm, curious question. "Yes." He said, "Well, you're going to Vietnam."

Q: *Oh my.*

SHEINBAUM: They were recruiting single males who spoke French.

Q: *Yes, I know, because I had to send some in later years with that qualification. I know very well.*

SHEINBAUM: There were five of us who went that year — three had gone the previous year, Dick Holbrooke, Bob Warne, and Vlad Lehovich.

Q: *And all of you made successful careers later but had experiences, I know, in Saigon and Vietnam. You were there for four years.*

SHEINBAUM: Yes, I was two years on loan to AID and then two years in the embassy.

Q: *And there were three ambassadors, Maxwell Taylor, Cabot Lodge and Ellsworth Bunker, while you were there. What was it like when you arrived in Saigon in '64?*

SHEINBAUM: Well, I have a very close friend, Gerry Hickey, an anthropologist who had spent a couple of years in Saigon in the late '50s. He still studies and writes about the Montagnards in Vietnam. In November 1963 he was on his way back to Vietnam and

Library of Congress

stayed with me for what was to have been just a few days. He wound up spending three months with me, but after the Diem assassination, they put a hold on visitors, so I had learned a lot more about Vietnam from Gerry and it sounded like I was going to a real hell-hole. I was prepared for the worst. However, when I arrived in Saigon in September 1964, it couldn't have seemed more peaceful. Five days after I got there, there was a coup, but you wouldn't have known it if you'd gone out on the streets. I'd gone over to the AID office on a Sunday to do some work, and when I came back to the hotel (the famous Continental with the lovely veranda looking out on a major square) I was told, "How come you went out? We're all restricted." Well, it didn't look like it from the traffic I saw on the streets — well, the traffic was indeed a bit lighter, but I was new to Saigon and it was a Sunday and I didn't find things to be uptight. There was a lot of military activity as time passed and a lot of government instability which bothered everyone. My first assignment was up in Hue, the old royal capital in central Vietnam, for seven months. There was a fear of Viet Cong behind every bush. I was warned that I couldn't trust any of the local people; even if they were government people, were they really working for the Viet Cong? And so on. And yet I had some very good relationships in those days. So I had an interesting although somewhat frustrating period in Hue. I was the AID rep for the city of Hue, while the provincial AID officer was an Army Lieutenant Colonel, who I think had a different agenda than just AID work, and he was a total loss as far as the rest of us were concerned. He was also a nasty guy. Then I was assigned down to Hoi An, a very old, historic town (formerly known as Fai-Fo) noted for its small port and now capital of the province of Quang Nam. They assigned me there as the provincial rep and I. . .

Q: But still with AID?

SHEINBAUM: With AID. I stayed there only six months because they brought in a senior officer over me, one of many who were two-three grades higher assigned - despite absence of knowledge about Asia - to buttress our civilian presence throughout the country. This guy was a poor administrator, offensive to the Vietnamese, and a pain, so they then assigned me to the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force as the civic action advisor. I

Library of Congress

spent the last six months in Central Vietnam with the Marines, an unusual and revealing experience. The Marines treated me very well.

Q: Now, when you first arrived, we were not actually in a fighting situation, were we?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct. When the Marines came ashore in early 1965, they were the first U.S. combat troops in Vietnam, and they came ashore in my province, Quang Nam. I was not informed of this beforehand, although the senior AID officers in Danang were in on it. It didn't have any great impact on my AID program in the province at first as the Marines took a defensive posture during all that period. They were setting up bases in Danang and Chu Lai; they built a new airstrip in Chu Lai, 50 kms south of Danang. And they were establishing reasonably good relations with the local people. But, of course, they were very distrustful of everything and, as we found out, they had good reason to be. For example, the Marines were perplexed to discover one morning that a Vietnamese they had killed the night before during an attack on Chu Lai was the spiker on the local volleyball team the Marines played regularly. But in general the situation was very quiet at that time. The Marines didn't go into an offensive posture until 1966, about the time I was leaving Central Vietnam.

Q: While you were with AID, did you have any connection with the embassy at all? The people in the embassy?

SHEINBAUM: Oh, yes. John Burke, one of my oldest friends in the Foreign Service, asked me if I would consider joining the political section after my AID tour, but I had planned on economic training at Princeton. You see, in '64 when I got squeezed out of that economic training at Princeton, they said, "Well, don't worry, we'll take care of you after your stint with AID in Vietnam." At that time, Jack Reinstein, who had been my Economic Minister when I was in Paris, was head of economic training at FSI. I wrote him that I'd like to get back into Princeton. And the response was, "Well, we have a new program, a six-month economic studies program at FSI." I said, "Fine, I'd love to go into that and then follow it

Library of Congress

with Princeton.” “Oh, no, no, that's not our policy.” The policy was that after you go through the six-month course, you get a tour of duty as an economic officer and then you can do economic training at a university. I said, “Yes, but by that time, I'll be over forty.” And forty was the cut-off for university training. So I said, “I've just finished my tour in Vietnam and I think that the Department is welshing on its earlier commitment to me.” That's the term I used with Jack and he said, “I don't think that's correct, that the Department's welshing on its original commitment to you.” I said, “I'm sorry, Jack, they are welshing on it because that was the commitment and I'm not getting it.” So I turned down the six-month course and joined Embassy Saigon's political section.

Q: All right, could you have left after two years in Vietnam? You could have gone to the six-month economic course if you wanted to take it? But rather than that, you went into the political section in the embassy.

SHEINBAUM: Right.

Q: Which put you there in some of the hottest days we've ever had in Vietnam, leading up to the . . . Were the Vietnamese you met and dealt with, were they optimistic, fatalistic, or how could you characterize their outlook and their prospects that they saw?

SHEINBAUM: Some were guardedly optimistic. Others were just going about doing their thing. I suppose, guardedly optimistic was the way I would characterize almost everybody there that I dealt with. I was assigned to deal with — not with the government's party — but with all the miscellaneous parties. I did that only for a year because I got scooped up by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to be his first staff assistant. Well, actually his first staff aide was Bill Shepard who was the holdover from Ambassador Lodge.

Q: Oh, yes. who ran for governor of Maryland, right?

SHEINBAUM: Right. But the Ambassador wanted somebody else and he focused on me. I turned him down at first. I said, “It's not the kind of job I'd like to do. I'm doing substantive

Library of Congress

work; I'd like to continue in that." And then Tom Recknagel, Deputy Political Counselor, came back to me and said, "Look, the Ambassador's looked around at everybody else - and you're it." And that was nice; I mean I worked with not only Ellsworth but also with Eva Kim who was the secretary. Eva and I were back-to-back in the office and she was great to work with.

Q: Were you often in physical danger, did you feel, in Vietnam?

SHEINBAUM: There were a couple of incidents involving military aircraft or Air America when we were in physical danger, not from hostile fire but from aircraft problems. I was never under fire but, of course, I was there during the Tet Offensive when we didn't know what was going to happen next.

Q: I wanted to ask you about that. You dealt with the non-governmental political groups — parties. What about the Buddhists? How do you assess the Buddhist factor?

SHEINBAUM: Somebody else dealt with the Buddhist movement, if you want to put it that way, because I didn't speak Vietnamese very well. The Buddhist factor was rather strong because, you know, the Buddhist clergy had become rather activist. There was lingering Buddhist resentment against Ngo Dinh Diem and the Catholic control of the government. In 1967 Nguyen Van Thieu was President and, because he was Catholic, the Buddhists felt that they were still getting short shrift since few other leaders of the government — the major players — were not strong Buddhist followers. I gained insight through numerous friends who were Buddhist. The Buddhists were resentful, but they were not a cause for major problems at that time.

Q: And they were not supporting the Viet Cong?

SHEINBAUM: No, as best as I can recollect as a group they were not overall supporting the Viet Cong. There were individuals and maybe some small components of the Buddhist

Library of Congress

community who were, but, generally speaking, I don't think they were supportive of the Viet Cong because they knew that things would be very tough afterwards - as they were.

Q: Well, as you know, there was growing frustration and uncertainty in this country as to our Vietnam policy from '65 on. Was that reflected in Saigon — the riots, the student demonstrations here, the protest marches?

SHEINBAUM: Reflected in what way, do you mean, Tom?

Q: Among our staff out there?

SHEINBAUM: We were very conscious of it, I would say. We were very conscious of it. Phil Habib was our political counselor the first eight or nine months I was in Saigon and then it was Arch Calhoun, and I think they felt the pressure building up in the United States. But we all felt that we still had to do our jobs the best way we knew how. We had to present the situation as it actually was. I think we were, generally speaking, pretty honest in our reporting. I saw much when I was working for Bunker. There was so much paperwork on my desk that I didn't have a chance to read anything but the most important documents. Yet, I was certain that the staff was pretty honest, at least for the State Department guys, especially those who were dealing with the reporting from the provinces. The five-person provincial reporting unit - Dick Teare was the head of it when I was there - laid things out on paper in a very realistic way.

Q: Punches were not pulled then?

SHEINBAUM: That's right.

Q: What was the effect of the withdrawal of our dependents from Vietnam?

SHEINBAUM: I wasn't in Saigon at that time (February or March 1965). I was up north. And of course, I didn't have any dependents. And after the bombing of the embassy in February, I think that there must have been a morale factor involved. I also think that it was

Library of Congress

an indication that things were not going well. And therefore, there was some foreboding about the future.

Q: Now, there were peace feelers being put out from Harold Wilson and other people all through the mid-'60's. Did they have any effect on our people out there?

SHEINBAUM: Not that I recall.

Q: People were not saying, "We should have grabbed this, or we should take advantage of this." Because they all came, of course, with various hooks in them as far as we're concerned.

SHEINBAUM: Yeah, sure.

Q: Now let's talk a little bit about the Tet Offensive. Were you personally affected by that?

SHEINBAUM: Well, I had just returned two days earlier from my father's funeral in New York. Dave Carpenter, my housemate, and I and a few friends had gone to Cholon (the Chinese part of Saigon - Tet is also a Chinese holiday) for dinner and to watch the colorful festivities. When the shelling began at 3 a.m. January 30, I had to be woken up by Dave. and we immediately got on two phone lines in Arch Calhoun's house next door one to the embassy and one to Washington. The connection with Washington was important because, after a while, our duty officer at the embassy, Allan Wendt, was too busy handling the wounded and giving directions to the Marines and others in the building.

[3 minute gap in tape]

SHEINBAUM: It was chaos in the embassy. And snipers were firing at it from across the street. Allan, our communicator, Jim Griffin, and the Agency people were very active. They were trying to report as much as possible. Allan had to give up; he just left the phone off the hook in the embassy, except for us and so we fed information back to Washington whenever Allan told us what was going on. I had to stay at Arch's house until about nine

Library of Congress

or so in the morning to keep on the only line between the embassy and Washington, but I left when I learned the Ambassador had already come to the Embassy after all the Viet Cong inside the compound — nineteen or twenty-one — had been killed. But they didn't get inside the Embassy, fortunately. The Marine who had been outside the building but inside the compound had been very alert, and as soon as shooting began at the embassy gates, he pulled those heavy, huge, wooden doors shut and bolted them as he came running in. Thank God for that because otherwise the V.C. would have gotten inside the building, having gotten through the fence after killing the four U.S. Army personnel at the two gates, and the V.C. were running rampant around the property. So I came to the embassy after Bunker had done his walk-through of the property, and things were chaotic. Some staff had slept through the racket going on throughout the city. I remember driving to the embassy and seeing a few bodies lying around — one hanging out of a car. I think we sent everybody home at three o'clock. There was probably a curfew. I left between five and six and I was the last one in the entire embassy to go. The Ambassador had gone, Eva had gone, and so I went outside and began to drive my Austin Healey — a white Austin Healey with the top down. It was the only car on the street all the way home, about 1 1/2 miles, and I was surely conspicuous all the way.

Q: A rather eerie feeling, I guess.

SHEINBAUM: It was. I got to the first corner, and as I was making a right turn I heard somebody pull the bolt back on his rifle. I slowed down, and I heard bolts being pulled back at a couple of other corners, but nobody hampered me and I got home. So that was that. Then a couple of times in the next few days, I had to run messages up to the palace to Thieu or to his aides. There were a couple of blocks en route where there were still some Viet Cong snipers, and the Marines that drove me in some wreck of a sedan had M-16s on the floor. They were holding them as we drove up to the palace and we kept our heads down. That was one of the last V.C. hold-out areas in Saigon, virtually across the street from the palace, but that the only way we could get into the palace was through that

Library of Congress

one gate. So I had to do that a couple of times. So that was perhaps the one time I really felt I was under fire, but nobody fired at us.

Q: Yes, you were in grave danger there.

SHEINBAUM: As you can see, I survived.

Q: Did the results of Tet change your viewpoint at all or those of the people with whom you worked in the embassy?

SHEINBAUM: We were trying to make things as plain as possible to Ellsworth Bunker — what the situation was. He was getting a very limited point of view from the military and perhaps to a certain extent from the Agency. The Agency was trying to be honest in many ways but unfortunately they were under pressure from their powers-that-be back in Washington. I forget who was Agency Director at the time. George Jacobson, the mission coordinator and a retired Army colonel, and I would bring in some people to talk with the Ambassador. We gave them false names for the Ambassador's calendar or maybe didn't even put them on the calendar. Some of these were military officers like John Paul Vann who would come in under an assumed name because General Westmoreland would have hit the roof if he knew that Vann was talking privately with the Ambassador. And the Ambassador was appreciative of that. George brought in his military contacts, and I brought in some of our provincial people. I think it helped to lighten the situation for the Ambassador. We were all beginning to become very pessimistic as to how things were going to come out. Then there was the second Tet Offensive a few months later which made us more apprehensive as it lasted longer and created more devastation around the outskirts of Saigon. I remember flying around in a helicopter a couple of times — Westmoreland's helicopter while he was in the Mission Council meeting — and seeing how bad things were. Of course, we didn't have television at the time (no CNN) and we, ourselves, didn't see anything unless you drove or helicoptered through those areas. And in April of '68, Lyndon Johnson was supposed to have met us — Bunker

Library of Congress

and Westmoreland — in Hawaii, but then Martin Luther King was assassinated, so a presidential plane was sent for us and we went to Washington instead.

Q: So you were back here during the Martin Luther King riots?

SHEINBAUM: Well, the riots had ended. It was during the phony peace.

Q: I see. And was Ambassador Bunker kept aware of all the talks that were going on in Paris at this time with Harriman and others?

SHEINBAUM: Yes.

Q: So you were fully in on the picture there. Well, you left in July of '68 . What were your thoughts, leaving Vietnam. Were you depressed or . . . ?

SHEINBAUM: Happy to be out of there because I didn't think we were going to succeed. I guess I'd become somewhat pessimistic even though we generally felt that the Viet Cong had been substantially weakened by their two offensives, and the North Vietnamese were for a while not able to sustain any further offensives as things stood at that time. Westmoreland asked for a lot more troops, 150-200,000, according to reports. I don't know whether he actually asked, I've never seen that defined or whether that was one of several options he put forth.

Q: Which was turned down?

SHEINBAUM: Which was turn down — wisely.

Q: Well, following those exciting years, you were transferred to Denmark.

SHEINBAUM: I lived through Vietnam again in Denmark because having just come from Vietnam and the Embassy had many requests for a speaker, particularly on Vietnam, I went to many parts of Denmark talking about U.S. foreign policy and particularly Vietnam.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you find any sympathy for our policy in Vietnam?

SHEINBAUM: Not much sympathy. But I found less antipathy than I expected.

Q: Well, you know, I lived through a little of that too after you'd gone and I found the people trying to be understanding, I'll put it that way.

SHEINBAUM: Yes, I didn't run into any hostility. In a couple of cases like one at the University of Copenhagen, boy, they were sharp-shooting me all over the place, as you can imagine. But then they invited Inger and myself up for drinks and we invited them home on another occasion. I saw opportunities there - these guys were tough but they were decent. A couple of the members of parliament — Bodil Koch, do you remember Bodil Koch?

Q: Yes, I certainly do.

SHEINBAUM: I remember her as she sat in the front row when I gave a talk on, I think, U.S. relations with China. Okay, Nixon had not yet been to China, as best as I can recall. And you know, there I see Bodil Koch smoking a cigar in the front row and I thought to myself at the beginning, "Man, I'm going to be in for a tough evening." And she asked some very poignant questions, but we walked out arm-in-arm.

Q: Well, the Danes are that way. Now you served under three non-career ambassadors, all of whom were colorful people — Angie Biddle Duke, Guilford Dudley. . .

SHEINBAUM: His wife was colorful, I'm not sure he was — well, maybe he was. Were you there under Dudley at all?

Q: No. I came under Russell. How did the Danes react to these Ambassadors?

SHEINBAUM: I don't think they had enough contact with Angie Biddle Duke. He was there only about a month when Nixon was elected. He didn't want to go. He said, "I know people

Library of Congress

in both parties. I'm going to stay on here." He had to have a direct order to go home. He left in April, three months after the Nixon regime took over. So I don't think there was enough contact with the Danes to comment. Gilford Dudley was seen as a nice, quiet political appointee but the work was being done by Byron Blankenship and the embassy staff. That's the way. Fred Russell was a different type whatsoever and you know him better than I do.

Q: I'll emphasize the word "different." You were never in doubt as to Fred's views about things, and I don't think he was a success as an ambassador - but that's another story.

SHEINBAUM: Yes, I think so.

Q: Now, you moved into a political job in Copenhagen.

SHEINBAUM: That's correct. I was the number two political officer.

Q: Having spent a good part of your career as an economic officer?

SHEINBAUM: Well, I had already spent a couple of years as political officer. . .

Q: In Saigon, too. And now you're in straight political work in Copenhagen. What were some of the problems we had there that you dealt with?

SHEINBAUM: Well, we had, of course, the attitude towards Vietnam. We were getting some heat from the Danish Government about Vietnam. And some other places — our policy in Africa, particularly Nigeria and the Biafra question (about which we were right, in the end), we were getting some heat on nukes in Greenland. Coincidentally, in the last few weeks, Tom, the Weekly Politiken from Denmark has been reporting a lot on secrets about our base at Thule that the Danish public didn't know about when I was there. I don't remember that there were any actual secrets about that base, it being a NATO base, but I guess with atomic weapons on the base, everybody assumed that . . .

Library of Congress

Q: I don't think that would be a surprise to many people. Anyhow, I know Greenland was, when I arrived there in '72, we were dealing with fisheries problems with Greenland then and Ambassador Russell took great delight in handling that problem, I remember. Did the return of the Social Democratic government under Jens Otto Krag have any effect on our relations with the country?

SHEINBAUM: I think that it didn't have too much of an impact because we and Krag were concentrating on Danish membership in the Common Market — the 1973 referendum. Somehow or other, jointly we pulled off a coup by sending Anker Joergensen, who later succeeded Krag, off on a tour of Europe which gave him a feel what NATO was about and the Common Market was about because he had been anti. He came back a changed man, as I recall. Now I don't recall if that was while you were there. . .

Q: No. That happened before my time, his trip . . .

SHEINBAUM: That had a significant impact because then Krag was able to turnover the government to a believer.

Q: Yes, I was there when Joergensen succeeded Krag and I was there for the referendum too.

SHEINBAUM: And then Krag came here as the Common Market representative. We saw him a few times; I would go and speak with him, and he also liked dancing parties.

Q: That's right, he was the Common Market representative, wasn't he? He had charisma in a way that Joergensen didn't, but they were different individuals.

SHEINBAUM: Especially if there was a female around. Ask Helle Virkner, or Inger, for that matter. Not that he did anything inappropriate.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, I always maintained that I was never in a country that enjoyed a party more than Denmark.

SHEINBAUM: I always liked their dinners because, even when there was only two couples at dinner, often it broke up into a little dancing — a little cognac and dancing.

Q: Yes, that's right, it certainly did. Well, do you have any other comments about your tour in Copenhagen?

SHEINBAUM: I did, of course, meet my wife there. Two months after I arrived there, I was hit by a car while walking across the street. Oh, you're not aware of that story?

Q: No.

SHEINBAUM: It was six o'clock in the evening, I'd walked out of the embassy and I was going to Ernie Goodman's house for cocktails. I was headed for my car and I was crossing Oesterbrogade down at Stockholmsgade near Oesterport station. It was January 30th, the road was slightly damp, as things are in Denmark at that time of year. And this guy came along at too high a speed, went about ten feet further than he should have and hit me in the crosswalk. The light had been in my favor. I wound up in Kommunehospitalet for about forty days, and Inger was in my ward about the last ten days. The romance didn't begin until three or four months later.

Q: Well, I'll say the hit was very unfortunate but the outcome was quite nice. Well, from Denmark you were assigned back to the Department to the Bureau of European Affairs, where you took over the Benelux desk and you worked for, I gather, Walter Stoessel and Art Hartman.

SHEINBAUM: Dick Vine was the office director. Dick had been in that office I had served in back in the '60s — Atlantic Political-Economic Cooperation.

Library of Congress

Q: He'd been with me in Bonn before that. What were some of the issues you dealt with on the desk?

SHEINBAUM: Oh, nothing major really that I can think of. We didn't have any real crises that I can recall.

Q: What about the Belgians? Will they ever resolve their linguistic and ethnic differences or is that just built in?

SHEINBAUM: I think that will continue for the foreseeable future. They'll have periods of quietude but then some rabble-rousers will come around and try to make political issue out of it as they reach for power. That will cause additional problems but they'll handle it.

Q: You got to the desk there just after I'd left Holland so we didn't a chance to cross at that time. But one little question just to amuse myself. When the Dutch Ambassador gave a decoration to General Westmoreland, did you go over with him to the Pentagon for that or not?

SHEINBAUM: No.

Q: No, all right. I would have . . . Not many countries were decorating General Westmoreland at that time.

SHEINBAUM: I don't remember that the Dutch had given . . .

Q: The Dutch gave him an award.

SHEINBAUM: Was that while you were in the Netherlands?

Q: No, that happened after I left. But I read about that. Well, after two years on the desk, you moved into Personnel - Performance Evaluation. Who was the head of Performance Evaluation?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: Bob Barbour and then Peter Bridges. Bob Barber I knew from years before. He was in Saigon when I was in Laos. And where else had we joined forces? I'm not sure.

Q: Maybe in Paris?

SHEINBAUM: Was he in Paris at that time, I don't recall.

Q: I think he served there?

SHEINBAUM: I know he served there but I don't remember if he was there at that time.

Q: And Nat Davis was the Director General?

SHEINBAUM: That's right, at first, and then Carol Laise came in. Of course, I knew Carol Laise from my Saigon days. Carol and I got along very nicely, I think because I was plain-spoken and she liked that.

Q: Well, she also knew you'd worked for her husband?

SHEINBAUM: Of course, as I would see her whenever she came to Saigon. But I would sometimes tell her things that I thought were “no go”, and she expressed appreciation.

Q: How would you judge Department morale in those years, when you were there in the mid-'70s?

SHEINBAUM: A hell of a lot better than it is now. Department morale in those days — well, we had ample promotions in those days. Pay scales below what our people would have gotten in the private sector if they'd gone out then, but I think morale was okay. I think Vietnam coincidentally opened up a lot of opportunities for advancement and, of course, a lot of guys realized that and went to Vietnam as a result, even though some avoided it. But I think that the promotion numbers were good, as I remember, in those days.

Library of Congress

Q: Now, about our rating system, which you people had to be very familiar with in performance evaluation, did you find it fair and candid or not? Were officers inclined to pull their punches?

SHEINBAUM: People who sat on the promotion boards, after a little experience, like a week or so, began to read enough between the lines so that they could determine what was being written. As I personally am aware, I'm sorry to say, that unless you had somebody who wrote well and knew how to write a good efficiency report, you weren't doomed but you did not have an advantage like others did. With the exception of Ed Killham I never had anybody who wrote a really scintillating — accurate, let me put it that way — on me who made my work stand out the way I would have liked to have seen. I mean, I won't say I was brilliant or perfect in every way — don't get me wrong — but nonetheless I think that a lot of my strong points were not conveyed in the way that I would have like. And, in those days, we were still rather shy about trying to help the rating officers write decent reports. We'd just come out of the period when there had been a confidential report as well as the open report, and so many rating officers refused to listen to requests to improve some language. In reports I wrote I always described some specific things that would have very helpful.

Q: I wanted to ask you about that dropping of the confidential section of the report, did that lead to blandness?

SHEINBAUM: I guess it did. It had to. But then, on the other hand, what did we gain by the confidential section? That provided a blank check to officers to write whatever they felt - and don't forget, we were also rating the spouses.

Q: Yes, we were, that's very true.

SHEINBAUM: And the representational side. The representational side is very different now than when we knew it twenty years ago. I think that, in retrospect, there had to be

Library of Congress

a compromise. I mean, did we want to continue with people being murdered in these confidential reports unfairly where they had no opportunity to see what was in them? I was horrified to find out once what was written in one of my efficiency reports — one from Saigon which didn't compare with what was written in the open report - and it hurt me.

Q: Well, it was subject to abuse, there's no question about that, but my experience has been that since the dropping of that, the reports are not very good in describing an individual; that they don't . . . they're afraid to get into things. Well, there're so many "don'ts" these days — things you can't mention. Did your experience in Performance Evaluation, Gil, lead you to favor the strict application of the "up-or-out" policy?

SHEINBAUM: Yes.

Q: It did, eh. Of course, there's continual griping about that.

SHEINBAUM: Of course the griping now is conflicted with the much lower promotion numbers so it's unfair to talk, I think, about the "up-or-out" policy . . .

Q: What was twenty years ago and today. How many officers were actually being selected out in the years you were there?

SHEINBAUM: Very few. Because it was, even then, a cumbersome process. The grievance process has since become more cumbersome and some things that went in those reports those days don't go now. But even in those days it was slow getting somebody out. And people were very reluctant to write somebody off the books in those days.

Q: I remember when I was in Personnel, I think there were less than ten a year being actually selected out — who actually left the Service. Many were recommended for it but by the time it went through the review panels. And finally, did the report of the "Young

Library of Congress

Turks” in the early 1970s have any effect on our performance evaluations system. You remember that group that . . .

SHEINBAUM: I remember the group but I don't remember how that impacted on the performance evaluations system. I think we came to grips with a couple of things — some of which led to what I believe should be a better process for the selection of new FSOs. We now have an assessment center — I'm not sure if they call it that now, the one-day thing instead of the one-hour interview which was really superficial and really depended on personalities. I served for three weeks on the BEX, the Board of Examiners, for bringing people into the Service which was revealing, but it was rather superficial and you get a feel for these people but not really how good will they do on the job. Some obviously were not suited. One guy who I thought was not suited went on to bigger and better things but not inside the Foreign Service. In Performance Evaluation, there were two interesting developments. Number one: I conceived and produced the videotape with the help of Geraldine Sheehan which had a hypothetical selection board. We actually took real efficiency reports but disguised names and places and everything else. We had people who'd served on selection boards filmed on videotape as they discussed these particular reports. We did have a couple of rehearsals because we felt that we had to make them relaxed, but we didn't tell them what to say on tape. It came out quite well and Carol Laise was quite pleased with that. I don't know how extensively they were used in the Foreign Service because I left Personnel shortly after that. The other thing was, that while I was serving in PE, I was struck by one thing: it seemed to me that as I was listening to the members of the selection boards talk, and as I myself read some of these efficiency reports, you could always tell which were women being discussed as there was a slight bias against them just in the way they were discussed. I didn't think it was mostly deliberate. So I did a survey of about fifty or sixty officers in the Foreign Service who had rated women — a few of whom were women. And my determination at that time was that ninety percent of those, in other words, the bulk of them, didn't realize that the way they characterized something was somewhat prejudicial, even though they didn't intend that.

Library of Congress

I think they were honestly horrified when I told them about it. There were a few who just didn't care. They said, "Well, that's the way they are." And some of the women rating officers were also guilty of this. I found that quite surprising. I don't know if it's changed at all in recent years but there was just a mindset then. Women were beginning to multiply in numbers in the Foreign Service and some openly wondered if these younger women could do the same jobs as men. Could they be representational like men can? Can a woman invite a guy out for dinner and not be thought of as trying to seduce him for information? As wives and girl friends might think? I think it was proven at an early stage that the new generation of women were very much equal to the task.

Q: Your tour in the Department came to an end in 1975? And you were assigned to Madagascar or should we call it the Malagasy Republic? I'm not sure which is the correct term at the moment?

SHEINBAUM: It's Madagascar.

Q: Was this an assignment you asked for?

SHEINBAUM: This came up rather suddenly. I still expected one more year in the Department. In fact, Inger and I were counting on staying until 1976. But suddenly, Greg Kryza, the Executive Director of the African Bureau, appeared in my office one day and wasn't talking to me. He had served on a selection board which I had been backstopping, but he was talking to my office mate and saying, "Oh, what a terrible thing, our Charg# in Tananarive had been killed in an automobile accident in Nairobi, and God, what am I going to do now?" About a half an hour or so later, his deputy, Lyle Hewitt, told me by phone that "Greg Kryza wants to know if you can go to Tana. And they want you to go in a week." So I told this to Inger, "Inger (this was on a Friday), they want us to go in a week." Well, I somehow knew it wasn't going to happen in a week, but that's what Greg wanted. And Inger says, "No way. I'm not going there — blah, blah, blah. I can't go that soon. And what do we know about Madagascar?" Well, I said, I've got a post report. And then on Monday,

Library of Congress

we invited for dinner Dick Matheron and his wife Kay. He had served as DCM there up to a year before. We had a delightful time at dinner, after which Inger said, "I'm ready to go." It took two months for us to get out of there because Bob Keeley had been named as Ambassador.

Q: We had not had an Ambassador there for some time, had we?

SHEINBAUM: Right, after Joe Mendenhall left in May 1975, there was no ambassador. The Government had changed to a Marxist-style government. Bob Keeley was nominated; the Malagasy Government, as it was known at that time, was sitting on his agreement. At any rate, he had to okay my going as his DCM, but he was out of town, so we had to wait until he came back. And it was two months before I actually left. Bob and I hit it off very nicely, but then when I got to Tana, I found that the Malagasy Government wasn't going to approve Bob Keeley. While they did not say so directly, they did not like the fact that he had most recently served (as DCM) in Cambodia where we in June had been forced to close our embassy as we had opposed the communist Khmer Rouge. And a Marxist government had just taken over in Madagascar.

Q: Leaving you as Charg#?

SHEINBAUM: So I was Charg# for about a year and a half and then I was replaced by Bob Barrett.

Q: What languages are used there?

SHEINBAUM: French and Malagasy. In Madagascar there is one dialect that is predominant especially up around Tananarive where Merina (M-E-R-I-N-A), pronounced "Mare-in", is the dominant dialect for intellectuals but otherwise . . .

Q: You could get by in French?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: They spoke beautiful French.

Q: Had the country calmed down after the assassination?

SHEINBAUM: You mean the assassination of February '75?

Q: Yes.

SHEINBAUM: Yes. The country was very quiet. It was, in a way, unusual. You didn't feel as though there was a dictatorship, but there certainly wasn't freedom as we would know it. The Minister of Interior, Amy Portos, was a man who had very strong control over the government and some power over Ratsiraka, the President — which was unfortunately, I think. And he was the only person in the government, as I recall, with whom I could not get along easily. Everybody else I got along with just fine.

Q: But not the Interior Minister?

SHEINBAUM: Yeah, the Interior Minister. But with Ratsiraka, I had a fairly nice relationship with Ratsiraka. And during the rare contacts with Inger, Mjme. Ratsiraka was extremely nice - but she was cooped up in the palace.

Q: Yes, I was going to ask, what our relations were with the Ratsiraka government?

SHEINBAUM: Well, he had closed down our NASA station there in July '75, shortly after he had taken office in June — summarily closed it. Fortunately, a lot of our vehicles were left outside (the employees had taken them home), so the NASA staff had gone back to the States and we had the benefit of a few extra vehicles. But we couldn't get access inside the NASA station. The Malagasy claimed it was a spy station, but all it did was track our spacecraft - a function no longer needed a few years later. Subsequently, while I was there, they also nationalized the oil companies — there were a couple of American oil companies operating there. That changed our economic picture there because that was

Library of Congress

our primary economic interest at that time. And we were not doing any business — there was not much going on in the economic sector and, of course, in general, things were slipping down hill in Madagascar. They still are, unfortunately.

Q: Yes. Did you receive cooperation from the government or were they stiff-arming you?

SHEINBAUM: Well, I had a couple of PNG cases on my hands. The first was the Marine NCOIC, who was just about to leave anyway. Then they did expel two of our people. The admin officer had been seen one day with a couple of students who were very leftist. Mind you, this was a Marxist government. The government didn't like us seeing Marxist students. A few hours later I was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and informed that they were PNG'ing three guys. They PNGed the administrative officer, the sergeant in the defense attach#'s office, and one other person whose name I did not know (later I learned that he hadn't served in the embassy there for several years). But they had his name still on the . . . By then we had had another ambassadorial nomination in the works which we withdrew shortly. So then it was determined that I should be replaced by another Charg# of more senior rank to let them know that not only were we withdrawing the nomination, but we were not going to send anyone in for the long haul. I think that the next ambassador there was sent about 1980-81, about four years later.

Q: What was the attitude of the local Malagasy people? Were they friendly to you?

SHEINBAUM: Yes, quite. We had a number of good friends there. Some of them, of course, were rather cautious — maybe most of them were cautious, but I had two good personal friends who were ministers in the government whom I would see quite frequently. I had good relations with the Soviet Ambassador, the Chinese Ambassador, and the French Ambassador. The French were kind of leery of our role there, but, of course, that had declined. I had encouraged the French not to weaken their role there and which proved to be a good point. I'd told the French — there were two ambassadors during my tour — to forget about thinking of dropping their aid. I said, "No, that would be a mistake.

Library of Congress

Because you're just leaving a vacuum and you know who will replace that vacuum" — as the Soviets already were. The Chinese had been trying to get an edge in there and, in some ways, I think Ratsiraka favored the Chinese as a counterbalance, but the Soviets had stiff-armed their way into a very dominant role.

Q: So much for communist fraternal feeling, eh?

SHEINBAUM: The Soviet and Chinese Ambassadors only met once while I was there. That was at my farewell.

Q: Very interesting.

SHEINBAUM: We have a group picture of the diplomatic corps there with the two of them. They were very outwardly civil on that occasion, but you could see the gulf between them. Both Mao and Zhou En-lai died while I was in Tana, and I made calls at the Chinese Embassy both times because I thought that was appropriate. I mean things were evolving — this was 1976 — between the United States and China and I needed to reflect that. I had no instructions and I had to decide each time on the spur of the moment. I just could not see not signing the condolence book.

Q: Well, that was the right thing to do. I mean, Nixon and Kissinger had gone to China. We had relations. What was the influence of the Cubans there? Were they. . .?

SHEINBAUM: Not much. They provided a security force for the President but that was it. They didn't get in the way. Or at least not in any way that was perceptible to me. I think Ratsiraka was trying to make sure that he stayed as much in control as possible. He didn't want any of these outside influences, even if they were Marxist brothers, coming to dominate.

Q: Well, you then were assigned directly to Malawi?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: I actually left Madagascar without an onward assignment. And it was the wrong time. It was the middle of the winter here and there wasn't any suitable job left so I hung around the Department. That's when I had three weeks in BEX in San Francisco and in Boston. Although Malawi as DCM was not so appealing — it turned out to be a good choice.

Q: Bob Stevenson was the Ambassador there?

SHEINBAUM: He was the first one there.

Q: What were our problems with Malawi then or did we have any?

SHEINBAUM: We did have some. [President H. Kamuzu] Banda had arrested — or detained — about two thousand political figures in the past couple of years and we were very unhappy about that. We had therefore suspended our AID program and our Peace Corps program. In the mid-1960s, the largest Peace Corps program in the world was in Malawi: four hundred volunteers — most of whom were teaching English. One of whom was Paul Theroux, the author.

Q: Oh, he writes nice travel books and other things.

SHEINBAUM: Well, the thing is he got on the outs with the powers-that-be there because he wrote some things rather critical in those days. He was accused of associating with the wrong people and thus gave a bad name to the Peace Corps as far as Banda was concerned. Banda was consequently very reluctant to continue so we let the program wind down. We had three volunteers there when I arrived, two of whom — a husband and wife — were working in the nature conservatory right in Lilongwe.

Q: Having been the largest Peace Corps project in the world?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: That's right. And then . . . he released one group. But he had made a major mistake, Banda. In February, before I arrived (I arrived in July), his goons had walked into our USIS library and arrested one of our locals. And without any protest from the embassy. USIS was clearly designated — by the Malawians — as diplomatic territory. Then Bob Stevenson refused please by the DCM to let this be known to Washington. He reportedly said, "I can handle it." He had made, apparently, a misstep earlier on, but somehow the word got back about this error of judgment and he got rapped over the knuckles. Yet the Department extended his stay there for nine more months anyway — he had friends in Personnel where he had served as a Director just before Malawi. At any rate, at the time I arrived in early July 1977, that week Banda released all the rest except for a handful — like sixty political detainees, and the sixty were guys he had had in for a long period of time. Since we had cut off our AID program and our Peace Corps program over the detentions, I said to Bob Stevenson, "We've got to do something." He didn't want to do anything about it, afraid of getting rapped over the knuckles again for approaching a subject that might be taboo. Well, I thought this was wrong. Coincidentally, about a week or two later, we had a request from the Malawi government to send advisors to a conference in Lilongwe they were having — a conference to solicit development aid for specific projects. They wanted to see if the U.S. could provide some very assistance along the lines of what we had provided in previous years. I said, "Well, there's nothing wrong with us attending this." Bob resisted but I was able to get the word to the regional AID people in Nairobi, and they were all for it. We attended, and we got a modest AID program going. We didn't have an AID mission there, so for two years, I was, in effect, the AID director.

Q: DCM and AID Director.

SHEINBAUM: Right. And in addition to the AID, we had been getting some word from Washington to see if we could resume our Peace Corps program. Number one: I had to figure out how to overcome Banda's resistance, and Bob Stevenson was reluctant

Library of Congress

to take it up too strongly with Banda because he knew the history of that Paul Theroux thing. There was a lot of interest on the part of the Peace Corps, and I felt that it would be suitable for the Peace Corps because the Malawians had made full use of the Peace Corps people previously. I was Charg# for about nine months in between Bob Stevenson and Hal Horan and I remember National Day in July 1978, when I was Charg# and Banda had already said to me that he'd at least think about bringing the Peace Corps back. He kept talking about "you know, these young people aren't very mature." I remember Inger and I were greeting him and his escort, Mrs. Kadzamira, whom Inger knew quite well, in a ceremonial tent in Zomba and we talked about this and that, Inger talking with Mrs. Kadzamira while I was talking with Banda. I said to him, "I'd really like you to think about the Peace Corps." And he started whining again about maturity, and I replied, "You know, just because a guy is old doesn't make him mature and just because somebody is young doesn't make him immature." The next day I got the word — okay. So I had to serve as Peace Corps Director although I didn't have any volunteers. A Director came out with the first batch of about 35 six months later. There were about seventy-five or eighty volunteers by the time I left and they've done quite well, I understand.

Q: But it was your dropping this hint in Banda's ear.

SHEINBAUM: It was funny, I just happened to fall onto that and that worked out well.

Q: And, of course, he wasn't a young man himself.

SHEINBAUM: No. And I wanted to say this about Malawi, when I said it turned out to be a good assignment. If I hadn't had the AID and the Peace Corps things it would have been Dullsville. We also had small children; they were one and four when we got to Malawi, and it was perfect for that reason. I could spend a lot of time with the children. We lived only five minutes away from the Embassy. We had a pool next to our house. Everybody lived well there, nice brick houses with nice grounds. It was a very nice arrangement. We had a couple of embassy recreational houses — one on the lake and one up in the mountains,

Library of Congress

on top of Zomba plateau, that were for the Ambassador's use and, of course, were for the use of the rest of the staff at other times. It worked out very nicely so it was a good two years.

Q: And after those two years, you went off to Asia again, to the Philippines?

SHEINBAUM: Well, actually I was supposed to have gone to Hong Kong and I was ecstatic over that. But Jimmy Carter decided - rightfully - to establish full relations with China January 1, 1979, the Department was going to move this job — a non-Mandarin-speaking job — to Beijing and, of course, I didn't have any Mandarin or any Chinese dialect. So I got scratched out of that. I was scrambling around because it was March when I got the bad news — after the good assignments have gone — but then Cebu came up accidentally because the guy who was going originally couldn't because his wife was a doctor and couldn't practice in the Philippines. So I wound up in Cebu and that was a wonderful four years. For our young family, it was probably a far better place. And in the end, the Hong Kong wasn't moved to Beijing after all.

Q: How large was your staff there in Cebu?

SHEINBAUM: I had one vice-consul and four FSNs at the outset — five when I left.

Q: Was most of the workload consular at that post?

SHEINBAUM: Yes, much of the workload was consular but my function was not consular, except to oversee the vice-consul. The vice-consul, prior to my arrival, did spend some time on economic and political reporting. I would say maybe twenty-twenty-five percent of his time, but there was a ten-fold increase in the number of visa applicants between 1976 and the time I arrived in 1979, so he had no time for anything other than visa and passport work — consular services. And I didn't have much time for anything other than the political and economic reporting and I did a lot of that. I did occasionally do the visa stuff because I wanted to understand what he was facing, as best as I could so I could write accurate

Library of Congress

efficiency reports. Well, I've visited Cebu several times since we left in 1983. Four years ago, I think the staff numbered something like six Americans and like twelve FSNs. It's now down to zero Americans and about two FSNs and the post will be closed by the end of the year (1995).

Q: Leaving us with only Manila in the Philippines?

SHEINBAUM: Correct.

Q: Gil, you were in charge of your own post in Cebu, the only other post we have in the Philippines after Manila. Did you get to the capital often?

SHEINBAUM: I got there once every four to six weeks because I didn't have a confidential secretary and felt it was necessary to check in with the DCM and the Ambassador. The DCM was an old friend from Vietnam, Jim Rosenthal. The Ambassador first was Dick Murphy, whom we got to know quite well and we still have very close relationship with the Murphys, and then Mike Armacost whom we got to know quite well also but not the same social relationship.

Q: Did the Ambassador visit Cebu?

SHEINBAUM: Each one visited once. And each one had their feet hanging out the end of the bed. They were both rather tall.

Q: Yes, they were tall. I know Dick Murphy. I don't know Armacost. Were there rebels in your district?

SHEINBAUM: Yes.

Q: Active while you were there?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: Yes. The district covered the central Philippines, the Visayan Islands, and Mindanao and a few islands southwest of Mindanao call the Sulu Archipelago. You had the Moro National Liberation Front fighting the government but it had quieted down after Marcos made agreements with some of the Muslim rebels. But still it wasn't entirely quiet. Then you had the New People's Army, the NPA, the communists, the leftovers from the old Huks except reincarnated with different types of people. There were not so many in Cebu but there were some on various islands such as Leyte and particularly Samar which was almost completely infiltrated, then Negroes had many in the sugar plantations, and some in northern Mindanao.

Q: How often did you get to visit other islands besides . . .

SHEINBAUM: I was out on a trip, I would say, once every four to six weeks. I did a lot, much to the Embassy's anguish because I was using travel money, but I went on the cheap. Most times — I took my own vehicle, put it on a ferry and was on the ferries myself rather than flying over - and most of those ferries were old, rotted ships. I would drive up and down, much to the consternation of good friends in the Philippine army who were very concerned about my safety because they didn't want me to be an embarrassment by becoming a statistic. I did a lot of driving up and down roads that they themselves would not drive, except with heavy security.

Q: Were you ever in any physical danger there?

SHEINBAUM: No, not that I'm aware of.

Q: Now in your district, did you notice any anti-Marcos feeling?

SHEINBAUM: Yes. Cebu was sort of oppositionist. Cebu was always sort of oppositionist. For one thing, Cebu, which prides itself on having existed from before the time that Manila became a city, is now the second largest city in the Philippines, has been for many, many years. Magellan landed in Cebu and also died there. It is a very dynamic city, people are

Library of Congress

nicer there than in Manila. They have slums but not to the extent, proportionally, that you'll find in Manila. Cebu has been booming since shortly after the Marcos departure from the scene, whereas Manila took several years. That was because there was a very dynamic governor in Cebu, whose name was Lito Osmena, grandson of the old Osmeña president, who is very close with President Ramos by the way - he ran as Ramos's VP but lost.

Q: Were there ever any anti-American demonstrations at the Consulate. They had them in Manila but you didn't reflect them down there?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct.

Q: And did martial law affect what you did? I know that it was in effect for many years there.

SHEINBAUM: That's correct. Martial law did not affect Cebu in any way. . . Well, for one thing, although everything was dictated in a way from Malacañang, martial law was fairly casually enforced. So martial law didn't really apply except they knew who was giving the orders for the running of the administration.

Q: Could you see a build-up of the opposition to Marcos? Was it . . .

SHEINBAUM: We left three weeks before Nino Aquino was assassinated. But yes. I was surrounded by all the many Cebuanos who were anti-Marcos. I think what was happening during the last couple of years when I was there that stuck out in my mind and that was the drought. It wasn't a severe drought but it had a great effect on the production of coconuts and copra, you know, the oil that comes from coconuts. It's a very important commodity in the in central and southern Philippines. And the Cebu economy, to a certain extent, is built around copra on one hand and shipping and trade on the other. And the dryness, while not a real drought, caused the production of copra to drop considerably, depriving copra producers of coconuts. Really, we were waiting for the coconuts to fall down and that slowed down the economy in other ways. I could see that people were getting restless

Library of Congress

because number one: the coconut industry, the production side, had fallen into the hands of a couple of Marcos' cronies and this was bad news. But that wouldn't have been so bad had it not been for the fact that the production was down and the farmers and the copra producers were feeling the impact of the low coconut production, plus paying fees to the Coconut Authority (Marcos' cronies).

Q: Were there any Indo-Chinese refugees in your district?

SHEINBAUM: No.

Q: I know the Philippines took a lot in but apparently not . . .

SHEINBAUM: I guess some were on Luzon but most of them were on Palawan which was not in my district.

Q: And were you able to meet with opposition figures while you were in Cebu?

SHEINBAUM: Yes. And occasionally this was reported to Marcos himself. There were two incidents when Ambassador — I think it was Armacost — both times let me know that this was reported to him from the Palace. I also had written a report, an airgram, that leaked - we think it leaked on Capitol Hill - and it wound up in the hands of the press in Manila, played on the first page, even with a reproduction of the first page of the airgram. And there was my name very prominently at the bottom. Marcos told Armacost that I should be withdrawn, not to have me PNGed, just please have him re-assigned. Armacost said no. And Armacost was pretty strong about that. He asked me for advice. I said that, "You know, if I left at this time when everybody knows I'm not supposed to leave for a year from now, everybody would know the reason for it, and you've got the Marcoses going to the States on a State Visit a month from now." Marcos thought that we were trying to sabotage the State Visit — that a couple of us in the Embassy were always against him — the other one being John Maisto. John had left by that time but I was still there, and I'd written the airgram describing the economy in Mindanao. But, of course, the economy

Library of Congress

had to do impacted on the political scene and it was negative, very strongly negative. I thought if anything was going to erupt it would come from Mindanao because of the coconuts, particularly. So Armacost withstood that pressure. In September, they went on what seemed to be — and was — a very successful State Visit. As the Marcoses arrived on the helicopter from Andrews into town, George Shultz — who had only been in office about six months — asked Marcos, “What do you intend to take up with President Reagan tomorrow?” And Marcos says, “Mr. Sheen-bum.” I was the first thing he mentions. And George Shultz, who had never heard of Mr. Sheen-bum, had to turn to Mike Armacost who explained the case briefly, after which, according to Mike, George tells Marcos, “Oh, I don't think that's a subject you should raise with President Reagan.” And he didn't raise it. However, a month later, the Marcoses and the Armacosts and the Sheinbaums were all at Imelda's home on Leyte at the annual Leyte Landing Celebration (October 20) and Mike comes to me and says, “Marcos still would like us to get you out of here.” Mike saw how friendly Inger and I were with Imelda and Imelda's brother, Kokoy, and he asked me (this is Armacost) “Who should I approach? Do you think it will do any good?” And I said, “Oh, it might do some good.” We thought first of Kokoy, but in the end, Armacost ran into Imelda first and explained what had happened. Imelda said, “Don't worry, I'll take care of it.” Imelda knew us (including both our kids) fairly well. As a matter of fact, I saw Imelda in the last month. I went to see her when I was in Manila and we laughed over the story. Imelda had invited us - and many others - to stay many times in her sprawling setup in Leyte, and being the only diplomats around, the head table usually was only the Marcoses and the Sheinbaums. When the Armacosts were there, they were added to the table.

Q: Were you there for the Aquino assassination?

SHEINBAUM: No, we left about three weeks before. We were in Geneva at the time.

Q: I see. I was going to ask the effect of it in the district it must have had because it had an effect all over the Philippines. Well, you mentioned Geneva and that was your next post. Did you go directly from Cebu or did you get leave in the States first.

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: No, we went directly from Cebu and that was good because the guy that I was replacing had left and the new political counselor came in at the same time. It was good that the two of us started together.

Q: Were you the political counselor?

SHEINBAUM: I was not for the first year; I was the deputy political counselor and also the telecommunications officer — telecommunications meaning the relations with the UN agency, the ITU, the International Telecommunication Union which was a very active thing. I had to learn a whole new environment, especially because two months after I arrived, there was a big telecommunications exposition in Geneva and two months after that there was a big ITU conference. The chairman of our delegation — we must have had fifty people on the delegation — was Leonard Marks who was the ex-Director of USIA.

Q: So those were busy days for you after your arrival. Tell me, did the U.S. Mission in Geneva get its instructions from IO or EUR or both?

SHEINBAUM: IO.

Q: Did the Embassy in Bern or the Ambassador there ever get involved in what was going on the Mission or not?

SHEINBAUM: No, except when there was a VIP visit — whether it was George Shultz or Ronnie Reagan or George Bush, who was then Vice-President. There was not any problem there but there was a conflict at the time of Reagan's visit in November 1985, his first meeting with Gorbachev, for which I was the control officer. Gerry Carmen, who was our Ambassador in Geneva, thought he should be the first one in the receiving line and Faith Whittlesey, the Ambassador in Bern, thought she should be the first one in line. She should have been and in the end she was. It took quite a bit of business on my part to convince Gerry Carmen that he should not be at the head of the line.

Library of Congress

Q: Because he was going to write your efficiency report among other things.

SHEINBAUM: No, no, he didn't write it. I don't even know if he wrote a review.

Q: Yes. Tell me something about that Gorbachev visit. That must have been exciting days.

SHEINBAUM: It was. It was five months in preparation, during part of which I was Charg# because Gerry Carmen and the DCM were both gone. By that time I'd been political counselor for a year. A couple of people on the White House pre-advance team were difficult to deal with and the Swiss were difficult to deal with, but the Soviets were easy to deal with. I think it was at our first meeting with the Soviets that the head of the White House team politely said to the head of the Soviet delegation, a KGB general, "Well, uh, this is what I suggest." He was very discreet about it, but the head of the Soviet delegation said, "Oh, you just decide everything. If there is anything that I don't like, I'll let you know. But as far as I'm concerned, everything will be all right." It was the Swiss that were more difficult.

Q: During the talks themselves, did you get nearby, or were you informed?

SHEINBAUM: No. I set up the meeting places but I was not part of the meetings themselves.

Q: What was your mode of operation with the UN? Did the various agencies have representatives there?

SHEINBAUM: That's right. We had one guy who was handling our relations with the ILO, the International Labor Organization; we had one fellow who was half-time working with the UN Human Rights Commission; we had one officer who dealt primarily with WHO; we had one officer who dealt with the WMO, the World Meteorological Organization, as well as a couple of environmental organizations that were based in Switzerland.

Library of Congress

Q: How many other countries had missions similar to ours there?

SHEINBAUM: I think we had more over a hundred missions.

Q: A hundred missions. It was like being in a capital?

SHEINBAUM: Yes, right. And there were more missions there than there were embassies in Bern.

Q: Presumably Bern is covered from Paris and Bonn by some countries who wouldn't maintain resident missions.

SHEINBAUM: Correct.

Q: Were there difficulties coordinating among the U.S. agency representatives in Geneva?

SHEINBAUM: Well, we had such a flock of official visitors. There was some difficulty coordinating but mainly because we had so many people coming in and out, we could barely keep track of them. We have a conference officer who was doing all the arrangements. And often there were people that were coming in and out that he never knew about. The staffs of all the agencies, including ACDA, numbered, as I recall, about three hundred, but then you had hundreds and hundreds of official visitors. When there was a big conference, you had a big flurry; when there were smaller meetings, you have a small flurry. Inger met them all because somehow so many of them would come into the nurse's station for something or other. She had more contact with them than I did. But there was a lot.

Q: I assume you're rather glad you weren't the disbursing officer there as you'd been in Vientiane — to handle all that?

SHEINBAUM: Yes, I would say so.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you have any direct dealings with Swiss authorities?

SHEINBAUM: Yes.

Q: Of the Canton there or of the federal government?

SHEINBAUM: When we had a VIP visit like George Shultz or George Bush or Reagan-Gorbachev, I dealt with the Chief of Police of Geneva, Jacques Kunzi, and with the city's Chief of Protocol, Robert Vieux, who really ran the city of Geneva as far as we were concerned. We had very nice relationships with them, social as well as official, and they made everything move.

Q: And our relations with the Soviets? Can you characterize them?

SHEINBAUM: Well, from the time of the Shultz-Gromyko meeting in January of '85, things were looking up because Shultz and Gromyko got along very well. Shultz named the room in the U.S. Mission where they met The Gromyko Room. Of course, in March took over in the USSR. Then, in November we had the first Reagan-Gorbachev meeting, and the relationship got off to a very good start. I was the Mission's Control Officer for the Reagan-Gorbachev event. It took five months of preparation with White House teams in and out, and it came off beautifully. I located terrific venues and a villa for the Reagans, all of which they liked. It was easy working with the Soviets - not so easy with the Swiss. The Soviets told us right off to make all the decisions in planning and if there was anything they didn't like, they would let us know - and that occurred only rarely.

On the other hand, the Swiss went all out regarding security - little, peaceful Switzerland. The day before the party was arriving the head of the Secret Service and I almost had heart failure when we went to the villa to find barbed wire all around, a machine gun at the front gate, dozens of soldiers and 2 anti-aircraft guns in the rear. The Swiss colonel in charge said it was his duty to provide maximum security and he had full rein to do what he thought necessary. He was a reserve colonel, a bank vice-president by occupation, and

Library of Congress

he was stubborn. Meanwhile the media got photos of the machine gun, which resulted in Nancy Reagan saying emphatically she wouldn't stay there. The colonel would not budge, even when we told him we would give up the villa and move the Reagans to the Intercon - a great inconvenience for us and what we thought would be an embarrassment for the Swiss. I even went a bit out of bounds by going to the Army commander who was in town, and by calling the President of the Swiss Confederation (I was really desperate to take such a bold step), both of whom said that the colonel had full power and there was nothing they could do. The Secret Service chief and I were about to give up when the colonel casually mentioned that he would be taking his family to Washington the following spring and could they get a tour of the White House. Whereupon the Secret Service chief lit up and said he would give them the BEST tour possible - after which the colonel relented and everything went forward as planned.

I would so like to mention that Inger, who was Mission Nurse during our three years in Geneva, escorted Nancy Reagan during those meetings, of which the highlights - if you can call it that - were visits to drug rehabilitation centers. Nancy was in fact very interested in drug programs - and not just for show as there was no media coverage. I should also note that it took Inger some time to get the Swiss to own up to their drug problems, that a well-known meeting ground for pushers was under the Pont de Mont-Blanc in Geneva, and that they actually had rehabilitation places.

Nancy Reagan figured in another way with our family as she took a boat ride with a bunch of Swiss and American children, as a result of which she appeared on the cover of USA Today and the German magazine Bunte holding our daughter Britt (then 9 years old) by the hand. Quite a thrill.

Q: Any relations with other bloc representatives or not?

SHEINBAUM: Not so much. I mean the Soviets were the primary . . .

Library of Congress

Q: What were some of the substantive issues with which you had to deal during your period there?

SHEINBAUM: Well, the Human Rights Commission met regularly in New York, but then the subcommission met in Geneva for six weeks in February-March. That was always a critical time because there were so many delicate issues that had to be covered then. Dick Schifter was the head of our delegation both before and while he served as Assistant Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs; he was really very good as he knew how to handle so many different delicate issues at any one time. You know, the Department's Human Rights Report was annually in the forefront of everybody's mind in that season, and we had to tread very lightly on some things and yet make our points clear, unambiguous - which, I think, was very well done. With WHO we had major issues. Surgeon General Chip Koop was on each major delegation to the WHO during the time I was there, and he was very good, but he was at odds with the State Department's IO Bureau on different issues. They treated him very shabbily, you know, feeling that they knew more about international affairs than he did, yet he made the best of it and was very effective. He is really a very sterling character — with some tragic background in his family. It was very interesting for us to talk with him; Inger got to meet him also several times. ILO was a question of U.S. membership in the ILO that we had resumed and we were restoring a productive relationship. Critical issues, I think that's about it. There was nothing that was earth-shaking.

Q: Afghanistan didn't. . .?

SHEINBAUM: It didn't really come up so much at that time.

Q: And the refugee problem?

SHEINBAUM: Refugees, we had a lot but that was a different section. We had a fellow by the name of Karl Beck who handled our refugee section. We had very good relationships

Library of Congress

with both the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and then with the ICRC, the Swiss Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross, which did a lot of work with refugees and gave us great insight. It was very important to us. There was a lot of activity there but that's something I didn't usually get into.

Q: Did you get involved in things such as arms control — with chemical and biological negotiations?

SHEINBAUM: No. That was a separate entity under a separate administration. We had three ambassadors over there dealing with various aspects of that. Warren Zimmermann was there for a while; John Tower was there for a while; Max Kampelman and Paul Nitze — all who did well.

Q: And how about the Middle East — talks in the Middle East? Did they take place?

SHEINBAUM: No.

Q: They didn't impinge on any of your duties?

SHEINBAUM: No. The only significant political talks that took place were occasional ones of Chet Crocker, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, who would meet quietly with Pik Botha, the South African Foreign Minister. I had to set up a dinner or whatever it was at a discrete, out-of-the-way location. But Vice President George Bush came through Geneva frequently, and I was usually his control officer.

Q: Did the reduction of our funding for the UN have any effect on you?

SHEINBAUM: Not that I can recall.

Q: Because it was during those years that Congress began to whittle away at our contribution.

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: No, I don't recall it having an impact of any serious proportion on the funding for any of our specialized agencies that were based in Geneva.

Q: And I gather from what you say, that there was a good deal to be done in the matter of care and feeding of visitors including Congressmen?

SHEINBAUM: Yes. They didn't provide any problems - except in numbers. I had one group of congressmen, I think they were about twenty, and a few wives, but I don't recall for what purpose. Jim Wright headed the group, he was Speaker or about to become Speaker, I don't remember which. At any rate, the rest of the Mission, including our conference officer, were all shocked when I said (I was Charg# at the time) "We're going to put them on a nice bus and take them around." "You're going to put them on a bus instead of limos?" "Yes, put them on a bus." This isn't what is usually done. I said, "Well, we'll try it." And they loved it. They liked all being together. We had a little refreshment in the back. I handled the microphone and gave them a tour of Geneva, described what we were doing, where we were going, what we were eating and all of that and it was great. It was one of several coups I can remember in the Foreign Service.

Q: Congratulations. And I take it from what you say, there is enough work to justify a permanent office in Geneva.

SHEINBAUM: Oh yes, with the UN agencies absolutely. They were cutting out one position as I was leaving - the human rights affairs job which devolved to somebody else part-time. Probably with good reason but there was enough work for the human rights guy who did other things as well.

Q: Do we still maintain a consular office separate in Geneva or not?

SHEINBAUM: I don't know. We did at the time I was there but I don't know if we still do.

Library of Congress

Q: Whether it's been closed. I haven't heard myself. Well, when your tour there ended in '86, Gil, you went into retirement?

SHEINBAUM: I was being ticked out, okay, and I had a call from Dick Murphy who was Assistant Secretary for NEA and who asked if I would be interested (this was in February of '86) in taking over the Colombo Plan because Don Toussaint who had been Director had died suddenly of a heart attack while on a plane over the United States. He'd been in the job only ten months and while normally a person of the same nationality wouldn't succeed, the President of the Colombo Plan Council decided that it would be best to offer it again to the United States since Don had had such a short tenure. And so I was asked about it, and I arrived the beginning of July.

Q: Perhaps you can describe the Colombo Plan briefly.

SHEINBAUM: Okay. The Colombo Plan was established in 1950 at a conference of Commonwealth foreign ministers. At that time there were seven member countries of the Commonwealth. There was Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, on the developed country side, plus India, Pakistan (then including what is now Bangladesh) and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). And they decided that they needed some organization to coordinate the aid that they hoped would begin to flow from donor countries into that part of the world. The two people behind this idea primarily were J.R. Jayawardene, who was then Minister of Finance in Sri Lanka, later President, and Percy Spender who was Foreign Secretary for Australia. And so they established it in Colombo, and that's how it became known as the Colombo Plan. It was designed as a consultative organization; it did not have project funds. No money ever went to provide funds for specific projects. It was there to act as a deliberative organization. It was very prominent for the first fifteen years or so, but then it became overshadowed by organizations that had the project money — World Bank, Asian Development Bank, the bilateral organizations, UN agencies, etc. And when you look at lists of participants of early Colombo Plan meetings, you see people like John Foster Dulles and others of equal status. And they did wonderful things in those days, especially

Library of Congress

in furthering education and technical training. Over 300,000 Asians studied abroad over the years - and they are known as Colombo Plan Scholars. A remarkable achievement.

Q: The U.S. has become a full member?

SHEINBAUM: The U.S. became a full member in 1951. It was opened up the year after its founding to non-Commonwealth countries, and it brought in other developing countries in Asia as they acquired independence.

Q: How many countries are now members?

SHEINBAUM: Twenty-four. Britain and Canada dropped out just after I left in 1991, which was unfortunate, I think, because of some short-sightedness on the part of the New Zealander who succeeded me and because of one of the High Commissioners on the Colombo Plan Council. It was not a matter of money. Annual fees for each member country were only around \$12,000.

Q: To whom did you report?

SHEINBAUM: To the Colombo Plan Council, made up of the ambassadors and high commissioners of the Colombo Plan countries, resident in Colombo.

Q: How often would this take place?

SHEINBAUM: Well, we met four times a year but I reported regularly to the President of the Council who was always a representative of an Asian developing country. The present Director, by the way, is a Korean, the first time they've opened up the directorship to non-industrialized countries. And while Korea is an industrialized country, it's still included as one of the non-industrialized for the purposes of the Colombo Plan.

Q: How many people did you have in your staff?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: Twenty-nine.

Q: Twenty-nine; taken from all the countries, I presume.

SHEINBAUM: No, there were three international officers, two non-Sri Lankans besides myself, and twenty-six Sri Lankans. But I also have to mention that there's a Colombo Plan College in Manila. It's a college for the administrators of technician education - it neither educates nor are there technicians who attend it. These administrators of technician education come in for short courses — which can be as long as several weeks or as short as a few days. And it is thriving in Manila. I visited when I was in Manila last month (August 1995). It has its own staff and then faculty, and the Director of now is an Indian, before him it was a Thai, and before that it was an Australian.

Q: And I gather the language used in the Colombo Plan is English?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct. I should also mention one important reason why the U.S. has maintained its relationship with the Colombo Plan. It's that the Colombo Plan has the only regional Asian drug-control program. It's called the Drug Advisory Program which has existed since 1973 with a small staff — four people — but they coordinate the activities of different agencies, bilateral and multi-lateral, that are doing work in Asia. We hold meetings, conferences and training programs for narcotics experts and people who are otherwise involved in . . .

Q: Do we get full cooperation from countries like Burma, Laos, and Thailand that are deeply involved?

SHEINBAUM: More and more. A lot from Thailand, some from Burma, but then the government of Burma doesn't have full control over the poppy-producing areas. But we get a lot of cooperation.

Q: Good. Did you have any liaison with the U.S. embassy there?

Library of Congress

SHEINBAUM: Oh, yes, very close. Jim Spain was the Ambassador when we first got there. I knew Jim from some years ago, and he invited Inger to live in the Residence for the week before I arrived with the kids. He didn't know Inger beforehand but it was very kind of him, and as a result he and Inger became very close and then we all three had a good relationship. Inger worked as the backup nurse at the embassy whenever the regular nurse was away, which was a lot. And then Marion Creekmore came in as ambassador after three years. Jim Spain retired in Colombo and lives there regularly. He seems to be thriving there and likes it. His wife and daughter had died tragically the year before he went to Colombo, his three sons are scattered, and he had no home to return to, but he had a lot of friends in Sri Lanka and that's why he stayed on there. And Inger and I had very close relationships with the DCMs who were there, Ed Marks and Don Westmore, as well as others on the staff.

Q: Did the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka affect what you could do?

SHEINBAUM: It didn't affect me in my job. It did affect our children to the extent that school was closed every now and then during a period of about two years whenever there was a strike or a threat of some violence. There was one period when things were very tense, the summer of '89, and it was at that time that the army was beginning to develop a plan for getting rid of the Marxist movement (the JVP) which they did in a very brutal fashion in October-November of '89.

Q: While you were there?

SHEINBAUM: While we were there. We had no fears for ourselves. The rebels - Marxists and Tamil Tigers - stayed away from foreigners, but we were very concerned for our Sri Lankan staffs. Whenever a curfew was declared by this JVP, the opposition group, we had to be very respectful of it because if one of our Sri Lankan staff was caught on the streets by them, we didn't know what would happen.

Library of Congress

Q: Your tour was five years, I gather.

SHEINBAUM: We were assigned for three years. I was asked by the Maldives High Commissioner who was then President of the Colombo Plan Council if would I consider staying longer. I said we would consider staying two more years — not just one because then we could see our son through high school — and the Council agreed to that without any question, so we had five very productive years there.

Q: Congratulations. I think that was an excellent assignment.

SHEINBAUM: It was; it was very interesting.

Q: It built on your Foreign Service background.

SHEINBAUM: Yeah. And I did a lot of traveling in Asia — I was gone a quarter to a third of the time — on mostly productive visits. Although some were less productive, I felt that occasionally I had to show my face, or rather the Colombo Plan face — I shouldn't be so egotistic — but the Colombo Plan face at various conferences was important and at each I made rather forceful statements as I was not hampered by bureaucracy or politics. So I think people remembered what we were doing and heard of what we were thinking.

Q: Do any countries dominate the Colombo Plan?

SHEINBAUM: Not really. India tries to but it depends on the nature of their High Commissioner at the time. But even so, their High Commissioners have been very respectful of everybody else. There was one occasion at one of our ministerial meetings in 1988, in Dhaka, when the Indian representative was being rather obstructive about a particular issue having to do with water resources up in the northern part of the sub-continent. They were resisting our call for regional cooperation which had already begun. But, you see, most of those waters flow through India and they wanted to have as much control as possible. Well, frankly, this guy was very stupid about it. He was awfully nice

Library of Congress

to me. He took me to lunch to try to convince me that we had to go slow on this particular thing. I said, "No, that's not the way to go. There's no reason why India cannot agree to this. This won't jeopardize Indian interests. If anything it'll help Indian interests because it shows a spirit of cooperation which your government at that time was trying to resist but knew it was not going to win." And in the end, the guy left early, and that opened the way for India to accept the thing with a footnote which didn't bother us. And subsequently, the Indian government began to reverse itself on water resources cooperation.

Q: So after you left there in '91, you came back to the States?

SHEINBAUM: Correct. We'd not lived in the States for sixteen years. Our daughter, who was fifteen, had never lived in the States.

Q: That's rather unique these days. And '93 to '95 you were a consultant with the National Security Educational program.

SHEINBAUM: Right. Actually, I began there in late '92. It was by a fluke that I got involved with it. I heard about them through a friend who was associated with community college organizations, and I simply walked in and said, "You know, I have this Foreign Service experience. Can I be of use?" Well, they seemed to like me, and although they couldn't figure out initially where I would fit, it turned out that I was the only one with any real international experience and this is a program for American students to study abroad under special circumstances, primarily to study in the developing world. It was enacted in 1991 by the Congress which set up a one hundred-fifty million dollar trust fund for American students to study in countries that are not ordinarily studied by Americans. It meant, in effect, the third world. It eliminated Western Europe and Canada. And so we've spread them out. Each year we sent out about five hundred graduate and undergraduate students — some for as short as three months, some for as much as three years — depends on what they are seeking to do. They make a proposal and then the group of educators that come in — all academics — make the decision. The staff didn't do that.

Library of Congress

(We belonged to the Defense Department, by the way, because the funds originally came out of Defense appropriations.) And so the educators determined whether or not the applicant's proposal was realistic.

Q: Yes, I notice it's called National Security Education - so that's where the Defense tie come in.

SHEINBAUM: I stayed with them until February of this year when I moved over to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Q: Which has just let you don a trip to the Philippines?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct. They brought me on because they hadn't done much in Asia. They'd had some minor involvement in Mongolia, Nepal, and Bangladesh, but they didn't have money from AID for Asia — most of their money comes from AID but there's money from foundations and corporations. They didn't have any money specifically for Asia because, to a certain extent, Asian governments have had good electoral experience, although they do need a lot of work in my observation in improving and modernizing their electoral systems. And so, they asked me would I be willing to come on board half-time? I felt that my usefulness with the NSEP, the scholarship program, was coming to an end because we got the program going and all I was doing were routine things for the last six months. So this happened to be a very fortuitous circumstance. The primary objective was to set up a conference of senior Asian election administrators in 1996, which I'm still working on.

Q: To be held in Manila?

SHEINBAUM: It may be in Manila. We're asking the Philippine government if they would agree to that. I don't see any reason why they wouldn't. And then we've got other projects going on. My reason for going to the Philippines was not for that but because the Filipinos wanted some guidance from our experts on modernizing their own electoral system. I don't

Library of Congress

have experience as an election expert but I do know the Philippines and that's why I was asked to be team leader. I had two experts including the Executive Director of the DC Board of Elections.

Q: Extremely interesting. Well, Gil, I want to thank you for your thoughts today and, before I leave, I want to ask you to give me your thoughts on the Foreign Service as a career — what you thought of it and what you think of it today, for a person about to enter?

SHEINBAUM: As a mutual friend of ours said about two weeks ago when I had lunch with him at DACOR House, "This is the end of the Foreign Service as we know it." I had a great career. I didn't reach the heights that I had hoped to, but I think most of that is attributable to the fact that I got married late in life, raised a family later in life, and wanted to lower my sights to a certain extent so that I could spend more time with my family and especially in their younger years. I have been very fortunate in that regard. I enjoyed every post I had — every post without exception. I had some wonderful experiences; I had a few sour cases, but I had some wonderful experiences that I really enjoyed. I learned a lot and I think that I made several significant achievements. As far as recommending it to somebody else as I mentioned to you, our daughter is thinking about the Foreign Service, but she won't be ready for another five, six, or eight years, and the nature of the Foreign Service during that time may change, maybe for the better. Maybe we'll be getting over this very bad period and that things will improve somehow. I don't think the Foreign Service will be the same as we knew it in some ways. But I don't think that I've given up on it. Somehow or other, the U.S. has to have some kind of expertise out there.

Q: Oh, absolutely. We need it.

SHEINBAUM: And that, in fact, is what I'm doing right now: a memo to Bob Miller, President of DACOR. I think this is a subject that DACOR ought to be following.

Library of Congress

Q: I agree. And I want to thank you. This is Tom Dunnigan. The date is September 6, 1995, and I've been talking with Gilbert Sheinbaum, a retired Foreign Service Officer and an old friend.

End of interview